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## CRITICAL NOTICE.

## HEBREW ILLUMINATED MSS.

*L'Ornement Hébreu* par D. GUNZBURG et V. STASSOF. (Berlin : S. Calvary & Co., 1905.)

BARON DAVID GUNZBURG has, in conjunction with M. Vladimir Stassof, produced a work of very great interest for the history of Hebrew MSS. ornamentations. The publication consists of a portfolio of twenty-seven plates, measuring close upon 23 in. by 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. ; and as the margins are as a rule rather narrow, the size of the reproductions will at once strike one as being on a magnificent scale, apparently the scale of the original MSS. themselves. In many cases, however, the plates contain a variety of smaller ornamentations grouped together partly on account of their artistic relation to each other, and partly for the sake of the grand effect which the combination was intended to produce. The plates are in the following order: First a frontispiece, bearing no number, and intended to show the artistic "motifs" underlying the ornamentations that follow ; then Nos. I-VI, VII, VII\*, VIII-XXII, followed by plates *A*, *B*, and *C*. The ornamentations of plates I-XXII are all taken from the collections of Hebrew MSS. acquired by the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg from Abraham Firkovicz in 1856, and from his representatives in 1876. Plate *A* is taken from a MS. of French origin in possession of the Bibliothèque Nationale, at Paris ; plate *B* reproduces ornamentations contained in certain British Museum MSS. ; and plate *C* represents an ornamented Yemenite MS. in Baron Gunzburg's own possession.

We shall return presently to the contents of the plates for the purpose of taking note of them in detail. For the moment we must consider the main idea which Baron Gunzburg and M. Stassof desire us to see embodied in their fine portfolio of ornamentations. This idea is lucidly expressed in the "Avant-Propos" penned by Baron Gunzburg, and it amounts to a thesis of no less magnitude than this : That there exists, or, at any rate that during the period covered by their MSS., and long before, there has existed, an art of ornamentation which can be called specifically Jewish, and that the "motifs" underlying this Jewish art can be traced clearly enough, though under various modifications, in the ornamented Hebrew MSS. coming from different countries of the diaspora. Both M. Stassof

and Baron Gunzburg are very deeply impressed with the reality of "la tradition artistique chez les Israélites," and they claim that their joint publication proves the thesis up to the hilt. It is, therefore, from a critical point of view very necessary to examine the theory in the light of all the available evidence; and this we may do without in any way belittling the fine portfolio of ornamentations before us. On the contrary, we may be grateful to the editors even for their error—if error we can show it to be—as to the cardinal point; for "*L'Ornement Hébraïque*" would probably never have seen the light, if it were not for the idea of a specifically Jewish art which inspired the editors with the desire of producing the work.

Now for the main idea itself. Can we accept the thesis that there does exist, or at any rate that there has existed, a peculiarly Jewish art of MSS. ornamentations? Let us look at the evidence. We have before us (1) an illuminated MS. of French origin, belonging to the thirteenth century; (2) illuminated Haggadahs produced (a) in the South of France or North of Spain, (b) in Germany and elsewhere; (3) an illuminated copy of Maimonides' *Yad* of Spanish origin, belonging to the latter part of the fifteenth century; (4) a finely ornamented copy of a Festival Service Book, written and ornamented at Florence about the middle of the fifteenth century. This list could be considerably extended, but it will be sufficient for our purpose. For if we compare not only the general impressions received from these specimens of the illuminative art, but also the details of the various ornamentations, it seems quite impossible to affirm that they, in any essential manner whatsoever, all belong to one and the same class of artistic work; and if furthermore the various kinds of Hebrew ornamentations are compared with the general ornamental art as it flourished at the periods named in France, Italy, Spain, Germany, and other parts of the globe, one is irresistibly led to the conclusion that the divers specimens of Hebrew MSS. ornamentations are neither more nor less than reproductions of French, Italian, Spanish, German, and other models. The theory, therefore, that there is, or that there ever was, an illuminative art that can be called purely Jewish is thus shown to be in conflict with the evidence, and would seem to be merely "the child aërial, of enthusiasm born and noblest love."

But how is it, we may fairly ask, that the ornamentations of the portfolio before us do—at any rate so far as plates I-XXII are concerned, produce an impression of homogeneity? and how is it that M. Ropett has been able to construct out of them the fine frontispiece embodying the self-same "motifs" underlying them all? The answer is that the MSS. from which these plates were taken have one and all an oriental or semi-oriental provenance, and that their general

similarity of character is determined not so much by their Jewish contents as by their more or less cognate origin. For although Abraham Firkovicz was as great a traveller as he was a scholar and a falsifier, there were certain limits to his travels as much as to his other doings. The Crimea, the Caucasus, Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia, were the countries the treasures of which he aimed at ransacking. The Hebrew MSS. collected by him no doubt came mainly from the Crimea, Egypt, and Palestine, though he probably also brought several from Mesopotamia. The collections purchased from him and his legatees by the Russian Government therefore bore throughout the eastern or half-eastern stamp of workmanship, and the similarity of the various ornamentations may thus safely be put down to this cause and—so far as the main characteristics of the art are concerned—to none other. In how far plates *A*, *B*, and *C* fall in with the general scheme of the ornamentations shown in the portfolio, and in how far they differ from it, is a question which can only be referred to in a detailed consideration of the plates. For the present it is enough to state our conviction that if Firkovicz had included France, Italy, Spain, and other parts in his travels, he might have brought together a collection of MSS. far less homogeneous in character than the great Hebrew Library established as a result of his efforts at St. Petersburg.

The conclusion, therefore, at which we arrive is that the existence of a specifically Jewish art of illumination is negatived<sup>1</sup> by the fuller evidence afforded by collections which largely differ in their character from the MSS. brought together by Firkovicz; and it may, perhaps, fitly be remarked here that the Jewish genius, so far as it can be identified with the highest and best of the race as a whole, moves in an entirely different sphere of excellence. Jewish artists there, of course, are; but they are *qua* artists merged into one or other of the schools of art that may exist at the time. Their genius is, from a Jewish point of view, not racial but individual. The thing would stand quite differently if a modern Jew were to excel in the art of writing sacred poetry or in the intuitive (as distinct from the philosophic) power of religious contemplation.

Before taking leave of Baron Gunzburg's interesting and, notwithstanding its untenable main thesis, inspiriting "Avant-Propos," it is necessary to remark that the question of the existence of a specifically Jewish art is quite distinct from that proposed by the late Professor David Kaufmann<sup>2</sup> as to whether the ornamentations of

<sup>1</sup> This does not, of course, exclude special Jewish features of a subsidiary nature, such as the choice of subjects, the introduction of Jewish symbols, &c.

<sup>2</sup> In the edition of the famous Haggadah of Sarajevo. The same topic

Hebrew MSS. were executed by Jews or Gentiles. The answer to this question will, in substantial agreement with that of Professor Kaufmann himself, have to be that, broadly speaking, Jewish artists of different schools, such as the Palestinian (?), Egyptian, Yemenite, Byzantine, French, or Italian, are responsible for the illumination of the Hebrew MSS. produced in different parts of the world. The ornamented *Masorah*<sup>1</sup>, which is so striking a feature in many of the plates contained in the portfolio, is in itself a proof that the Jewish scribe was in those particular cases also the illuminator; and it may, generally speaking, be affirmed that a thorough insight into the nature of the Hebrew text must be regarded as an indispensable qualification for an efficient style of ornamenting it. But such a qualification was very rare even among the more learned monks of mediaeval times.

We may now proceed to a detailed examination of the plates, and we must begin by saying that the description of them offered by Baron Gunzburg will, though brief, be found very helpful and instructive. Great care has evidently been exercised in the assignment of dates and suggestions of localities of workmanship in all cases where the MSS. themselves contain no explicit information on those points. The name of Firkovicz is, alas! but too frequently mentioned in connexion with "chemical experiments" and certain or probable falsifications. We will in the present notice only mention some of the most important features of the plates, and here and there add such observations as the subject may suggest.

The frontispiece, which, as has already been mentioned, was designed by M. Ropett, who is an architect by profession, is not described in the "Avant-Propos." The richly gilded design includes in its "motifs" the מִן דָוִן; the sacred candlestick; circles, squares, triangles, and other geometrical figures; ornamentations in lancet-form, &c.; and (at the bottom) a scroll of the law partly unrolled. On the upper margin is the legend: וַיַּעֲשֵׂה בְּתַבְנִיתָם אֲשֶׁר אָתָה בָּהּ וְרָאָה. On the body of the plate, artistically arranged, and in fancifully shaped letters bearing a resemblance to Hebrew characters, is the title: "Ornmentation des Anciens Manuscripts Hébreux de la Bibliothèque Impériale Publique de Saint-Pétersbourg." In one circle are the dates ה'תְּשִׁבְתָּה, 5646, 1886, i. e. the year when the plate was designed by M. Ropett. Names of collaborators, &c., are also given.

Plates I, II, III, IV, and XXI, I reproduce ornamentations taken

is touched upon in Dr. Julius von Schlosser's brilliant essay, entitled "Der Bilderschmuck der Haggadah," in the same work, pp. 211-52.

<sup>1</sup> The MSS. from which these plates were taken are probably of Karaite origin.

from MS. II, 17 of the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg. The date is A. Gr. 1241 (A. D. 930), and the editors believe Egypt to be the "pays de provenance." We will only mention that the seven-branched candlestick and Temple utensils, which are rather crudely represented on Plates II and III, are not at all identical in form with either those given on Pl. A, or those contained in the British Museum MS. numbered King's 1. This shows that even where perpetuity of tradition might reasonably be expected, the student who starts with a theory must be prepared for disappointment. The plates themselves show, in fact, two different forms of the sacred candlestick, the one rounded<sup>1</sup>, and the other with angular joints. A certain family likeness, however, there naturally is, as how could it be otherwise with representations of the same objects.

Plates V, 1-36, VI, 1-40 and 42 are taken from MS. II, 11, which is assigned to the ninth century. One of the reasons given for naming Syria as a possible "pays d'origine" are the triangles superimposed on several of the ornamentations. We here frequently meet with the much ornamented letter ס to mark, we suppose, the end of the Masoretic divisions called סדרים.

Pl. VI, 41 represents a portion of some fragments<sup>2</sup> of the *Hagiographa* (MS. II, 115), which is dated (4)754 A. M. (A.D. 994). It contains the following words within an ornamented oblong:—

יְהוָה נָא בְּלִי מִשְׁׁחָק  
לְרַב יְסֻף בְּרַב יְצָחָק

The owner, Joseph b. Isaac, is described in another part of the MS. as הַסְּפָרִי, but the editors are inclined to assign the fragments to a Syrian origin.

The entry under Pl. VI, 42 seems to represent some mistake on the part of the editors, as VI, 42 was already included in a preceding heading.

Plates VII and VII\* (taken from the MS. I, B. 19 a) is declared by the editor to be "un des plus beaux spécimens connus d'enluminure biblique et un des MSS. les plus remarquables pour l'étude critique de la Bible." Its date is A.D. 1010, and its origin is Cairo. The plates no doubt present us with very beautiful and most elaborate specimens of the Masorah in the form of illuminated diagrams.

Pl. VIII, 1-23 shows remarkably beautiful small ornamentations (taken from MS. II, 10) in the shape of six- and eight-cornered forms of the מִן דָוֵר, &c. They are assigned to the beginning of the eleventh century, and their origin may possibly be Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> It may be noted that the candlestick on the arch of Titus is rounded.

<sup>2</sup> Several of the MSS. are, in fact, described as mere strips or torn leaves.

Pl. VIII, 24, 25 (from MS. II, 12) shows a part of the Masorah in the form of an ornamented diagram, and (apparently) part of an epigraph. The MS. was in 1031 given to a Synagogue at Cairo, "si l'inscription est authentique." It is assigned to Egypt, and is believed to be of the ninth or tenth century.

Pl. VIII, 26-31 (from MS. I, 111) shows very beautiful small ornamentations (vignettes at the head of columns). Date, A. M. 4868 (A.D. 1118). Egyptian?

Pl. IX (from MS. II, 267) contains a dedication to a person named Aaron b. Abraham. The origin is apparently Egypt, and the date assigned to it is the beginning of the eleventh century. The colouring and style of ornamentation remind us strongly of Plates I, II, &c.

Pl. X, 1 (MS. II, 263), of Egyptian origin, and probably belonging to latter part of the eleventh century. The date of presentation to a Synagogue in Cairo, supposed to have been originally 1245, is believed to have been falsified by Firkovicz into 1045.

Pl. X, 2-13, XI (MS. II, 49, "malheureusement abîmé par Firkovich"); probably tenth century. Pl. XI represents a pointed portal, with texts within designs.

Plates XII, XIII, XIV, 1-6 (MS. II, 262), partly illuminated Masorah, reminds one again very strongly by its colouring of Plates I, II, &c. It is assigned to the beginning of the eleventh century, and its origin is Cairo. It may be noted that the chain-like ornamentations on Pl. XIV, 1 are not the same in form as those found on Pl. B (*vide infra*).

Pl. XIV, 7-17 (MS. II, 272) contains fine little ornamentations assigned to the end of the eleventh century, with Jerusalem as a likely place of provenance. The arabesque portions of the plate the editors were obliged to declare of foreign origin. If, however, the theory of a purely Jewish ornamental art be abandoned, this imitation of Moorish forms would fall in with the general tendency of adaptation. Very fine specimens of a modified kind of arabesque ornamentation are found in the British Museum MS. Harley 5698 (Maimonides' *Yad*; Spanish origin, A.D. 1472).

Pl. XV (MS. II, 17), a fine specimen of ornamented Masorah, which the editors (on doubtful grounds, as it appears to us) assign to the ninth century. The large star-like ornamentation is really a form of the eight-cornered שְׁמַעַן, the six-cornered form being given in smaller size within.

Plates XVI, XVII, XVIII (MS. II, 8) are exceedingly beautiful, both in general outline and in detail. The colouring is also very pleasing. The date is 951 A.D., and Jerusalem is believed to be the place of provenance.

Pl. XIX, 1-2 (MS. II, 168) takes us to a later time, the date being 1225 A. D. It is, however, very fine work indeed.

Pl. XIX, 3-7 (MS. II, 101) belongs to about the middle of the fourteenth century, and the ornamentations are held to be "empruntés à l'industrie textile du N. de l'Afrique."

Pl. XX (MS. II, 53) is richer and more elaborate still. It also belongs to the north of Africa, and is assigned to the fifteenth century, or near it.

Plates XXI, 4-6, 8-13; XXII, 1-17 (MS. II, 116) contain no ornamentations in gold or colours, but only Masoretic rubrics in all sorts of elaborate geometrical and other designs. They are assigned to the eleventh or twelfth century, and are held to have come from the Near East.

Pl. XXI. 14-18 (MS. I, 92) also contains uncoloured designs of Masoretic rubrics. The parchment is said to have been prepared "à la façon de France et d'Allemagne," and is supposed to belong to the twelfth century. The reader is referred to Cat. Harkavy, pp. 131-33, and "Altpjüdische Denkmäler aus der Krim," p. 92.

Pl. XXII, 18-19 (MS. I, 67), also Masoretic uncoloured designs, though no. 19 has a red outline round it. It may belong to the thirteenth century, and it is probably Egyptian in origin.

Pl. A (MS. no. 7, Bibl. Nationale, Paris) has already been referred to in connexion with the representation of Temple utensils spoken of under plates I, II, &c.

Pl. B contains ornamentations taken from the British Museum MSS. Or. 2363, 2373, 2365, 2350. It should be noticed that the MS. Or. 2363 (twelfth century) is not Yemenite, as the editors think, but in all probability Persian. The chain-like ornamentations belonging to it are, however, similar in the main to those taken from the Yemenite MSS. (compare XV, 1).

Pl. C contains rich, but, to our eye, not very pleasing ornamentations taken from a Yemenite copy of the *Hagiographa* in the possession of Baron Gunzburg. The date is A. D. 1292.

We may remark in conclusion that the Yemenite illuminations do not seem to us to be of the same genre as those described under Plates I-XXII.

This account of the fine portfolio of Hebrew ornamentations which Baron Gunzburg and M. Stassof have presented to the world of learning and of art may fitly be concluded with the often quoted but none the less ever true saying that "a thing of beauty is a joy for ever."